

Zhenwu

John pushed more of the blasted papers to the side of the desk, then realised that he didn't have anywhere to put the keyboard, so he added the papers to the pile of student files on a cabinet to his left. The stack was in danger of toppling so he bound it together with a thread of energy. He'd sort them out later.

There was a window above the cabinet, looking out over the western wall of the Wudang Mountain complex. The green hills of the Celestial countryside spread before him, dotted with the occasional small residence of those Shen who chose to live a more rural lifestyle. He took a moment to enjoy the outlook. It had been a long time — he had married Michelle and moved permanently to the Earthly Plane in 1995 — and the sense of being home, back where he belonged, filled him with satisfaction.

Emma was safe within his Mountain walls, Simone was strong and well able to take care of herself even without her yin, and his family was harmonious. His Mountain, although weakened by recent attacks, stood strong in the face of the demon menace. A few hundred more Disciples would bring it up to full strength, and his son's husband-to-be was doing a fine job searching the world for them.

He resisted the urge to go outside and do a sword set and turned back to the paperwork, then changed his mind and decided to do a sword set anyway. His personal assistant, Zara, would let him know if anything major happened.

Lord Venus is here to see you, Zara said.

Typical. Just as he was enjoying some respite the Jade Emperor had to send his most senior emissary.

Escort him in, then take stone form and record from your stand, John said.

He quickly grabbed all the papers off his desk, spun in his chair and dropped them on the floor behind him as Zara opened the door. He rose and stood behind the desk as Venus floated into the room, slightly above the floor. Venus was in full Celestial regalia, with a Tang-style robe of many layers of transparent violet silk over his human form of a slim mid-thirties gentleman. He had his hair long and tied on top in traditional fashion and carried — John nearly sighed with exasperation when he saw it — a red lacquered box containing an Edict from the Jade Emperor.

Zara was in its androgynous human form with golden skin and gleaming white hair. It changed to its stone form, a fist-sized diamond, and took its place in its decorative platinum stand on John's desk, ready to record the proceedings.

John saluted Venus. 'Honoured Lord Venus, Emissary of the Celestial, Carrier of the Way. Welcome to Wudang Mountain.'

Venus bowed in return, still holding the box in front of him with both hands. 'Honoured Emperor Xuan Wu, Celestial Master of the Nine Mysteries. I thank you for your warm hospitality.'

John put his hand out, palm up, towards one of the chairs on the other side of the desk. 'Please sit.'

Venus bowed slightly again, placed the box carefully on John's desk, and flicked his robe before sitting, pulling his long sleeves out of the way.

John sat as well and eyed Venus across the desk. 'What brings your honoured self to my humble facility?'

'I am here in my capacity as emissary to present you with an Edict from the Celestial One Himself, may he live ten thousand years,' Venus said.

'Ten thousand years,' John echoed. He leaned back in his executive chair and waited.

'And it's been *far* too long, you ugly bastard,' Venus said. 'Fucking leave me and Number Two alone to handle his Celestial Temper-Tantrumness — we'll never forgive you.'

'Er Lang still hasn't spoken to me,' John said, leaning on his hand to cover his smile.

'Er Lang's madly in love with your woman, which is an achievement in itself,' Venus said. 'His dog's ready to tear her to pieces.'

John raised his hands in exasperation. 'What do they see in her? She's plain, over forty, slightly overweight from spending too much time on energy work, and hardly ever wears make-up or fancy outfits. She's the opposite of what an attractive woman's supposed to be and they all adore her.'

'I'll tell her you said that,' Venus said with amusement.

'So will I,' Zara said.

'Record. Do not comment,' John said, glaring at the stone in its stand.

'My Lord,' Zara said, its voice full of laughter, 'they don't all adore her. Many members of the Celestial regard her as an ugly, arrogant pain in the ass.'

'The little stone is right, if altogether too honest,' Venus said. 'Everything you said about her is true, and it has made some Celestials unhappy about her presence here. She is

strong-willed, outspoken and cares nothing for her appearance; these are not regarded as qualities that a good woman should possess.'

'Am I still pissing off half the Celestial?' John said.

'More than half.'

'Good.' He waved one hand over the desk. 'So what's in the box?'

'Take a look for yourself.'

John glowered at Venus, spun the intricately carved box to face him, and thumbed the clasp. The box sprang open, revealing the Edict within. John slipped the vermilion ribbon from around the scroll, opened and studied it.

The Celestial Emperor of the Northern Heavens, His Imperial Highness Emperor Zhenwu, is hereby instructed by the Celestial to undertake an information-gathering mission to the Western Corner of the World. It is this realm's opinion that demons are gathering in the far west of the nation known as England . . .

John smiled slightly. The Jade Emperor had that part wrong, and it was a convenient loophole if John ever needed it. As far as they knew, the demons were up to something in Wales, not England.

. . . and the Celestial Emperor is hereby ordered to travel to that Corner immediately following Mid-Autumn Festival and to stay in the country known as Great Britain . . .

John shook his head. Wales was part of Great Britain, which meant the loophole was gone, but did the JE really mean just Great Britain? He needed to spend some time updating the JE on the status of western Europe. The rest of the world, for that matter. He would bet money that the JE had never even seen the internet.

. . . until the demons are identified and located and the Shen of the West are contacted, or one month has passed, whichever comes first.

John frowned. A whole month away from the Mountain? Why a month? He glanced at Venus, who wore the serene expression he used when he expected someone to explode in his face. Did the Jade Emperor know more than he was sharing? John shook the scroll to open it further. Of course he did.

The Emperor Zhenwu is to return in one month and present himself to the Celestial Palace with the results of his explorations.

Ten Thousand Years, etc.

John let the scroll roll back up and tossed it on the desk. ‘Has he said anything at all about why a month?’

Venus carefully maintained his explosion-proof expression. ‘No.’

‘Did you tell him to say England instead of the UK? It’s the sort of sneaky thing you’d do.’

‘Nope, he did that one himself. I thought you’d like that. Then he changes it to Great Britain, which means he knows exactly which country he’s specifying and you aren’t allowed in Ireland.’

‘Or the European continent,’ John said. He leaned on the desk and rubbed his chin. ‘That’s much too specific to be a mistake.’

‘Damn straight.’

As usual when he was distracted, John’s hair came out of its tie, but he ignored it. ‘Why do I get the feeling that I’m being set up for something extremely nasty?’

‘The Celestial is the pure and divine ruler of the Heavenly Realm and cares for us all with equal compassion and heartfelt warmth.’

‘That doesn’t answer my question.’ John leaned back and ran his hands over the top of his head and through his hair, which had already become tangled. ‘I suppose we have no choice but to trust him to do what’s best for all of Heaven.’

‘Ten thousand years,’ Venus said.

‘Even if it means sacrifice.’

‘Ten thousand times ten thousand years,’ Venus said.

‘Fuck you.’

Zara made a high-pitched noise then quickly cut it off.

‘Erase that,’ John said, waving one hand at the stone.

‘I didn’t hear anything,’ it said.

‘Damn, I’ve missed you,’ Venus said. ‘No more women for a while after this one, eh? All of the Celestial suffers when the Turtle is being a Turtle. We’ve gone far too long without your reassuring presence.’

‘I’ve vowed to Raise Emma and marry her and that is all I want from life. Apart, of course, from the safety of my family and protection of the Realm.’

‘It’s good to have you back, my friend.’

‘It’s good to be back.’ John opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a flask of fiery Sichuan rice wine. ‘Zara, find a couple of wine cups. This has been sitting here for more than fifty years and it’s about time I opened it.’

Zara disappeared from his desk.

Venus took the flask and examined it. ‘Tiger’s own cellar, eh?’ He glanced sharply at John. ‘Is this stolen?’

‘Of course it is.’

John used energy to remove the wax stopper and waited for Zara to return.

My Lord, Zara said, sounding concerned, *Er Lang is here*.

‘Come on in, Number Two,’ John shouted at the door. He dropped his voice. ‘Thanks, Venus.’

‘I told him about the wine,’ Venus said with amusement.

Er Lang let himself in and nodded to Venus. He saluted John. ‘Lord Xuan Wu, Celestial Master —’

‘Shut the fuck up and sit down,’ Venus said. ‘Ah Wu’s opening one of the Tiger’s special vintages.’ He leaned on the chair to look behind him. ‘Where’s that damn stone with the wine cups?’

Zara floated in with a tray suspended above it holding the ceramic wine cups.

‘Apologies.’

‘Get another one for yourself,’ John said as the tray drifted to land on the desk. He picked up the cups in turn and filled them from the flask, then raised his own. ‘Venus, Er Lang, two of the greatest comrades in battle an old Turtle could ever wish for. Thanks for putting up with the Imperial bullshit while I was gone, and let’s make sure those demon bastards never lay their hands on any of our charges while we still breathe.’

Venus and Er Lang raised their cups and sipped the rice wine, then both made a face.

‘I have a good Californian vintage red back at my house, next time we should open that,’ Venus said.

‘I was about to say something similar,’ Er Lang said. He raised the flask and studied it. ‘Is this really from the Tiger’s cellar?’

John poured himself another cup. ‘I see that now I have returned I will have to give you two lessons on the fine art,’ he drained the cup, ‘of being . . .’ he filled their cups, ‘*men*.’

‘That’s very good coming from someone who only recently spent several weeks as a woman.’

John shrugged. 'I'm yin. I had no control over it.'

'And neither of us had a chance to see it,' Venus said. 'I've heard that you're a . . .'
He glanced at Er Lang. 'What's the expression?'

'Hottie,' Er Lang said with satisfaction. 'The talk of you in female form will keep the Celestial gossip mill grinding for many years.'

'Good, it'll move attention away from Emma's little bungle,' John said with feeling.

'I can't understand why you keep her around after she imprisoned half of you,' Venus said.

'She didn't do it. The Demon King did.'

'Still,' Er Lang said, 'I hear she's an interesting creature. Care to share what you discovered when you examined her?'

'Zara, bring up the file on my monitor,' John said, turning to face the screen.

'My Lord,' Zara said.

'Level one, eyes only,' John said. He leaned his chin on his hand as he scrolled through the notes. 'Because of her Western nature it's difficult to quantify exactly what she is; she doesn't fit into any of our existing categories. There is some demonic character there, but it's unlike anything we've ever seen . . .'

'As she demonstrated when I forced her into Mother form,' Er Lang said. 'Her demon form didn't have control over her, and she protected the students as fiercely as she did when she was human.'

'Even though she was full of demon essence and in Mother form, she protected humans?' Venus said in disbelief.

'She was ready to give her life for them,' Er Lang said.

'She was tamed, then?' Venus said.

'Nope,' Er Lang said. 'We know that for sure, because two minutes later the Dark Lord tamed her.'

'So she's a demon? You should have informed the Celestial.'

'She's not a demon,' John said. 'She's a human with characteristics of both Shen and demon without being either.'

'Impossible,' Er Lang said.

'I agree,' Venus said. 'Either you're Shen or demon. You can't be both. You can fall to be demonic or you can be Raised to be Shen, but you can't be both at the same time.'

John didn't look away from the screen. 'She's just enough demon to be able to accept an infusion of demon essence without it killing her. She's just enough Shen to change to

snake form and manipulate shen energy. I speculate that she's the only one to exhibit these attributes because she met me and . . . ' He hesitated.

'Lived on the Celestial Plane?' Venus said.

'No,' John said. 'My Serpent took advantage of her inherent snake nature and was using her as a vessel to defend my daughter when I could not. That seems to have caused all of this.'

'What do you mean, a vessel?' Er Lang said. 'She said you were possessing her, but of course that is impossible.'

John sighed with misery. 'Keep this to this room. I *was* possessing her.'

'What?' Er Lang shot to his feet. 'Ah Wu, how could you do such a thing? That is unacceptable and I must report it —'

'Shut up and sit down,' Venus said. 'I think there's more.'

'There'd better not be,' Er Lang said, sitting.

'In her human form, she's faster and stronger than a normal human. We have another human here from Wales who's a similar type; his son is a half-demon who can take Snake Mother form. The Tiger's researchers say that his trait is attached to the female gene so only females show the full potential.'

'A male half-demon that can take Mother form? That's completely impossible,' Er Lang said.

'This young man is seriously disquieting,' John said. 'Someone over in the West has been interbreeding Shen, demons and humans, and Emma's the result.'

'And being possessed by you activated the other stuff,' Venus said, understanding. 'You're the only Shen on the Plane who is capable of something as demonic as that.'

John mumbled at the desk. 'I am fully aligned to the Celestial. I made my choice.'

'We know that, Ah Wu,' Er Lang said. 'We've seen you fight.'

'It sounds like too much of a coincidence that Emma would land in your lap like this, ready to be changed by proximity to you,' Venus said.

'It wasn't. The Demon King in his guise of Kitty Kwok set us up.' John sighed and rubbed his eyes. 'We will go to the West and see what is happening. Our Demon King seems to be involved; he was there overseeing the experiments on the Western men we are sheltering. They will come with us and guide us. Something serious is happening over there, and we need to know what it is.'

Venus waved one hand at the box. 'So that's what all this is about. Now I see.'

John explained for Er Lang's benefit. 'It's an Edict. I have to go over there directly after Mid-Autumn Festival and stay until I either find out what's going on or a month has passed.'

'Who are you taking?' Er Lang said.

'Emma and Simone — I must protect them. Leo, to guard them when I'm not. The two Western men — their names are Tom and Ben O'Brien.'

'That's an unusual surname; isn't it supposed to be O'Brien?' Er Lang said.

'Definitely O'Brien, it's spelt slightly differently because it's an older version. Same as Emma's last name, Donahoe.'

'Fascinating,' Venus said.

'My Number One Ming Gui and my Number Two Yue Gui will mind the Northern Heavens,' John said. 'The Lius and the Celestial Masters will manage the Mountain. Er Lang, you're on call to see to the defence of the Celestial Palace.'

'Wonderful, now Ah Wu's back I don't have to manage the defence of the entire Celestial Plane all by myself,' Er Lang said with cutting sarcasm.

John shrugged. 'An Edict's an Edict.'

'What do you think you'll find there, Ah Wu?' Venus said.

'A breeding program. Humans, demons, Shen, somehow kept captive and forced to have children. Emma's ancestors were exiled for marrying; someone was telling them when they could have a family, and who with.'

'Controlling who could marry? That's sickening,' Venus said.

'That's the way it was here until about a hundred years ago,' John said.

'We forget the cruelties of the past so quickly,' Er Lang said.

John deliberately focused his intent dark gaze on Er Lang. 'I hear you challenged Emma so that you could court Simone when Simone was only sixteen.'

Er Lang paled. 'I had no intention of courting her, my Lord, it was merely a ruse because I was convinced that Emma was a demon.' His voice rose in pitch when he saw John's face. 'Well, she *was* a demon! And I wanted to show the Celestial — I thought the Jade Emperor was too busy to know . . .' His eyes widened as John continued to glower at him. 'I was defending the Celestial! I have no intention of pursuing your daughter!' He saluted John, who had summoned yin in dark cold strands through his long hair. 'Believe me, my Lord, I am here to protect the Celestial, and although it was once acceptable I know that it's no longer the way —'

'Calm down, he's toying with you,' Venus said.

‘What?’ Er Lang relaxed when he saw John smile slightly. ‘Don’t do that to me!’

John pulled the yin back and filled Er Lang’s cup. ‘You wouldn’t be able to handle my daughter anyway. I daresay any man on the Plane will find her a challenge when she’s of age and ready to choose a partner.’

‘Hell yeah, she has a lot of her mother in her,’ Er Lang said. He drained his wine cup and made another face. ‘The Tiger saw you coming, my friend.’

‘He usually does.’

